

Chapter 44

The Greatest Rescue
of All Time

I'm sorry to tell you Bopsy has leukemia." The doctor choked up as he spoke.

"Oh no!" the 26-year-old mother sobbed.

"How long does he have?" the child's father asked.

"Only a few weeks at best. I'm so sorry. I wish I had better news."

Back at home the boy's mother thought of an idea. "Bopsy, have you ever thought about what you'd like to become when you grow up?"

"A fireman." The child smiled at his mother.

Another thought came to her. She went to visit the local fire department in Phoenix and explained about her son's final wish. "Could you take him for a ride around the block in a fire engine?" she asked.

Fireman Bob had a big heart. "No," he said. "We'll do better than that. Bring him next Wednesday and we'll make him an honorary fireman for the whole day. He can eat with us and go out on calls with all the firemen. If you give me his measurements, we'll

special-order him a fireman's outfit, with boots and helmet made to fit. The helmet will not be a toy, but the real thing, with the Phoenix fireman's emblem on it. They're manufactured here in Phoenix, so we'll rush-order them."

Three days later Fireman Bob came to the hospital, dressed Bopsy in his fireman's uniform, and escorted him out to the parking lot. They boarded a hook and ladder truck, and Bopsy got to help steer it on the way to the fire station. He was in heaven! His dream had come true! Three fire calls came that day. Bopsy went out on different trucks to all three. He rode in the paramedic's van and the fire chief's car, and TV stations videotaped him for local news. He had so much fun that he lived three months longer than the doctors expected.

Then "one night all of his vital signs began to drop dramatically, and the head nurse, who believed in the Hospice concept that no one should die alone, began to call the family members to the hospital. Then she remembered the day Bopsy had spent as

a fireman, so she called the fire chief and asked if it would be possible to send a fireman in uniform to the hospital to be with Bopsy as he made his transition.

"The chief replied, 'We can do better than that. We'll be there in five minutes. Will you please do me a favor? When you hear the sirens screaming and see the lights flashing, will you announce over the PA system that there is not a fire? It's just the fire department coming to see one of its finest members one more time. And will you open the window to his room? Thanks.'

"About five minutes later a hook and ladder truck arrived at the hospital, extended its ladder up to Bopsy's third-floor open window, and 14 firemen and two fire women climbed up the ladder into Bopsy's room. With his mother's permission, they hugged him and held him and told him how much they loved him.

"With his dying breath, Bopsy looked up at the fire chief and said, 'Chief, am I really a fireman now?'

"'Bopsy, you are,' the chief said.

"With those words, Bopsy smiled and closed his eyes for the last time."

What love poured out to the child from those firefighters! It offers just a little insight into the great love God poured out in Jesus Christ for us all. Jesus didn't come to earth because He wanted to become human, but because humanity needed a Saviour. He came for others and not for Himself. Our Saviour came to die. Now the heartbeat of the New Testament throbs with the glorious fact that He will return again. An average of one verse in every 25 speaks of this future.

The Importance of Calvary

As we stand in the shadows of Calvary, looking up to that wonderful Man hanging from the cross, we hear those words of triumph, "It is finished" (John 19:30). They put history into a completely different perspective. Gone are dreams of human beings as the arbiters of their own destiny—for, if they are, why this Man's death? Vanished are the dreams of unlimited self-fulfillment, because Christ came from outside history to bring to humans that which they do not have in themselves and, therefore, could not work out by themselves. Also disappeared is humanity's ultimate despair. History is not careening off course toward nuclear holocaust. Instead of being under the mushroom cloud, history lies beneath the fallout of Calvary. The end of this Man ushered in the beginning for all other humans.

History moves relentlessly toward its rendezvous with destiny—meeting Christ rather than human improvement or extinction. The fact of *this Man* shatters all possibilities, for good or evil, that human beings can control their own future. Human destiny is grounded in the life and work of the *Man Jesus*, and not in any other human. The world moves inexorably toward the unfolding of what has already been completely realized in the life of Jesus as a Man among humanity. Within His life is wrapped up the decisively determining factor of all human history. He brought humanity in Himself through a glorious resurrection to the other side. It is just a matter of time until all His followers stand within their own resurrection or translation. He's coming for both.

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The future has already been lived in the past—in Jesus Christ. He received the final Pentecost—the unlimited outpouring of the Holy Spirit. That launched Him on a mission that brought the close of probation to the people of His lifetime. Then He plunged into the greatest time of trouble that ended in the holocaust of Calvary. That end shattered all human endeavors to usurp the reins of world destiny. True, many have tried since, but His life and death spoke the final word over our world. It is His planet. He won it back from the hands that had wrenched it from Him in Eden. Love bore long with rebel creatures, both angelic and human. But here at the cross their hellish plan lay fully and forever exposed. The Man Jesus died a conqueror. Paying the price, He earned back the right to ownership of Planet Earth. Soon it will be a new earth. It is just a matter of time, that's all.

And no one can change this fact. No tyrant can reach up and grab the world from His grasp. It remains firmly and forever in the hands of the Crucified One. None can undo Calvary anymore than they can undo their birth. Both are irreversible, irrepeatable acts. Thus the goal of human history came at Calvary. There humanity reached into the heights. For there God died for humanity. Could there be any more concrete revelation of God's utter compassion and concern for the race? Since the cross, we live in time filled by the victory of Calvary—time determined by that goal. Hence, whether they know it or not, humanity does not merely advance toward a hoped-for goal in some distant day, with the pos-

sibility that it may never come. Not Humanity moves triumphantly from a goal Jesus has already reached.

That is the good news of the cross. It has within its very grasp the Second Advent. Because He died and rose again, He will return. Because He died, His people will live. And because He came to His end, they have a new beginning—in Him.

Can Humans Delay the Advent?

"That's all well and good," someone may protest. "I can see Christ bought back the world at the cross. But why hasn't He come to claim it? If I purchased a new car, I wouldn't wait a day to claim it, would you? How come He has waited nearly 2,000 years?"

Good question. Although we see in the New Testament a development from immanency to delay—for example, between First and Second Thessalonians (2 Thess. 2:1-3)—it's also true that immanency never really fully leaves the New Testament. Even in the last book, Revelation, written toward the end of the first century, John, the last surviving disciple, signed off the biblical canon with the words "Yes, I am coming soon" (Rev. 22:20).

Such focus on the immediacy of the Advent has concerned many Christians. They want to believe the authenticity of such promises, but 1,900 intervening years worry them. Could Jesus have been wrong after all? Was Albert Schweitzer right when he believed that Jesus made His promises to return but died a deluded man? Will He ever really return? Various ideas have developed to answer these questions. The theory of a delayed return is

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one. Its proponents believe Jesus is waiting for His people to mature, to develop to a particular degree of readiness for His coming to take place.

The deepest problem with such an idea is that God has never waited for such developments before, whether destroying cities such as Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19) or the world at the time of the Flood (Gen. 6, 7). Whether we're ready or not, Jesus will return. That's why He compares the kingdom to ten virgins, half of them foolish who never make it into the wedding (Matt. 25:10-13). Elsewhere He says that one will be taken and another left (Matt. 24:40-44), suggesting that His coming will find some ready and others not. Some even remind Him of the good deeds they performed, to which He replies, "I never knew you" (Matt. 7:22, 23).

Christ's parables mention delay. When the Bridegroom did not arrive immediately, all the virgins slept (Matt. 25:5), and a servant says that his Master delays His coming (Matt. 24:48). Now put with these the Ellen White statement "It was not the will of God that the coming of Christ should be so long delayed and His people remain so many years in this world of sin and sorrow."² What do we have? It seems the Lord has postponed His coming. Has He, though?

1. The Date Is Set

Many give dates for the Second Advent. William Miller eventually thought it would be October 22, 1844. Lutheran minister Johann Bengel in Germany set a date within a few years of Miller's.³ Other suggestions popped

up during the early days of the Advent movement. In recent times, as we saw in a previous chapter, Jubilee calendar proponents set dates, ignoring the fact that the annual Jubilee of ancient Israel has nothing to do with prophecy. Aad Verbeek, Jan Westein, and Piet Westein announced the discovery of what they considered an important time prophecy in Revelation 9:1-12. The 150-year period found there, they believe, reaches from 1844 to 1994. They conclude, "It means nothing more or less, than the time of Christ's second coming is apparently recorded in the Bible."⁴ But the period has passed and Christ is still not here.

"Many Adventists have felt that unless they could fix their faith upon a definite time for the Lord's coming, they could not be zealous and diligent in the work of preparation . . ." Ellen White warns. "Those who persist in this error will at last fix upon a date too far in the future for the coming of Christ. Thus they will be led to rest in a false security, and many will not be undeceived until it is too late."⁵

God the Father knows everything (Job 37:16; Ps. 139:1-18; 147:5; 1 John 3:20), including the Second Advent date (Matt. 24:36). He could have revealed it to humanity, but He didn't. He realizes that if we knew the time, we'd probably wait until just before the event to get ready. That would be dangerous, because we could die before that date, or if alive, wait too late. More than that, being ready for the Second Advent is the same as fitness for it. It takes time and is not the work of a moment. Exceptions do exist, of course, such as the thief on the cross, but that

was for someone who didn't know about Jesus until then, not for a Christian who puts preparation off until the last moment.

The fact that God knows the end from the beginning should not suggest determinism or a type of fatalism. God does not predestinate, or predetermine, human destiny against human volition. Nor does He arbitrarily set the return date. On the other hand, humans cannot—in the ultimate sense—hasten or delay that date either—at least in the absolute sense. Or else Christ may never come.

Yet, it's not fully correct to say, as David J. Bosch did, "mission may never be regarded as precondition or prerequisite for the coming of the end, neither may the church hasten the end through her missionary fervor. Mission is no hand on the clock of the world."⁶ The fact is, both divine determinism and human delay are too one-sided.

2. The Balanced Position

Neither God nor human beings have the sole input into the Second Advent date decision. Rather, God's foreknowledge took into consideration all of human hastening and delaying and simply fed all the data into His computer (to use an anthropomorphic illustration) to get the appropriate printout date. His advent will, therefore, take place at the best time, in which He takes into consideration both His foreknowledge and human hastening and delaying. Neither solely determines the date, operating in a vacuum as if the other did not exist.

If humans could really hasten the Advent by themselves, Christians

would face the greatest salvation-by-works emphasis ever—in spite of the gospel. On the other hand, if humanity could really delay the Advent by themselves, then the present generation on our planet must represent the terrible lack of preparation and delaying that previous generations experienced. So, in heaven, the final generation will need to thank those prior generations for the miserable lives they lived to delay the Advent and which gave them a chance at birth—and heaven. And if such a thing were true, then the final generation would be an unexpected or unplanned-for one—there merely due to human delaying and not to God's planning. Such thinking posits a second-class status to God's end-time people.

The fact of the matter is that God planned for everyone who enters heaven. Indeed, He loves the world (John 3:16). All come within His divine will, and He loves all equally. The fact that time lingers does not oppose His will, and therefore His love for all humanity. He simply longs for all to be saved and gives time for the work of salvation to reach its logical conclusion. "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief" (2 Peter 3:9, 10). Note the balance between (1) divine forbearance and (2) human unexpectedness of the Advent.

Threefold Dimension of Last-Day Events

Eschatology, or final events, are not unidimensional, that is, having to

do solely with the future. In the light of the cross they are three-dimensional. We can speak of the end that has already arrived, an end that is present, and an end to come. No vacuum exists between the promise to come and the delay to fulfill it. The coming Christ fills present time. He is on His way.

Early one morning at the Skogsborg Sanitarium in Sweden I awoke surprised to see it light at about 2:00 a.m. It was the morning I wanted to take a picture of a sunrise above the sea. So, dressing quickly, I rushed out to set up the tripod and prepare my camera. Then came the longest wait I've ever had in picture taking. The light from the east began to spread across the horizon until finally, after about an hour, the sun rose above the horizon. In Manila I've seen the sun pop up in a few moments by comparison. Not in Sweden. I took the picture and went back to bed.

Years later I awoke in the night with a thought. Have you ever done that? At such times I've said, "Oh, I'll remember that in the morning," only to find that I didn't have a clue what it was when I woke. Have you also done that? So that night I wrote down the idea, then went back to sleep. The next morning I began to write it out. It became an article published by *These Times*.⁷ Here's a synopsis of it.

Just as every day has a sunrise that precedes it, so the coming eternal day has a sunrise too. The light of that sunrise began to show in the eastern horizon when Jesus rose from the grave on Resurrection Sunday. It continued to cast light across the horizon as Jesus returned as the Spirit of Christ at

Pentecost (John 14:15-18; Acts 2) and its extension through history ever since. The dawn is getting brighter as we move closer to Christ's appearance—when we will see the Son (1 Thess. 4:16-18). In this way the whole New Testament is the dawn of the eternal day. It means, in a qualified sense, that Christ is already on His way.

No one can stop Christ's coming anymore than anyone can prevent a sunrise. Have you ever tried to stop a boulder pounding down the mountain toward you? Or have you ever tried to jump out of a roller coaster and halt it before it plunges down the big one? "Never," you say. So it is with the Second Advent. No one can block Christ's coming! For, properly understood, it has three dimensions: past, present, and future. To look solely to the future dimension is to lose the full picture.

Scholars have not always recognized this fact. C. H. Dodd emphasized the past dimension in his "realized eschatology," and Rudolph Bultmann focused on the present with his "timeless eschatology," or "existential eschatology." Jürgen Moltmann zeroes in on the future with his "proleptic eschatology." But what is the biblical scenario?

Patently the New Testament documents have a shifting emphasis. The earliest writings, such as 1 Thessalonians, speak of Jesus as almost here (1 Thess. 4:13-18; 5:4, 23). Paul undoubtedly believed then that he would be alive to see Jesus return. But the Lord showed him otherwise, so in his second letter he corrected his earlier optimism. There must pass enough time for a counterfeit anti-Christ system to develop (2 Thess. 2:1-8).

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We do not move toward the end, delaying or hastening it, as if humans have a great contribution to make or as if the reins are really dangling from heaven and fall into our hands. Ordinary human hands were not the ones nailed to the cross. His hands were. He alone earned the right to control world events. And He unfolds all others precisely out of that past event. For, in one sense and in a very determinative way, what was enfolded within that pivotal event is what is being unfolded now in time.

All last-day end events issue out of that Calvary end event.

"Well," some might question. "if that is so, was Pentecost or the sending of the Holy Spirit an end event? Isn't this, after all, the fulfillment of His promise to return? Doesn't this explain the supposed delay much better? Isn't it a fact that the immediacy of Pentecost maintained the immediacy of the return? He came through the Spirit 50 days after He left."

But this overlooks the fact that the Bible never equates the two. In fact, it separates them. The Old Testament looked forward to the coming of both members of the Godhead—the Messiah (Isa. 7:4; cf. Matt. 11:3), and the outpouring of the Spirit (Joel 2:28, 29). The New Testament speaks of the advent of both the Spirit (John 14:15-18) and Christ (Matt. 24:30). We mustn't confuse the two.

Bultmann's timeless eschatology subsumed all future reality within the present moment of encounter with the Spirit. He considered it personal, repeatable, and timeless. Thus the Second Advent promises receive their fulfillment every day the Spirit comes

to a person, and it will always continue without any change. There is no future Advent day. It is just another day, like today, with endless ones to follow. Here the cross becomes meaningless. After all, could not God have come to us without sending His Son to live and die? Didn't He encounter people in the Old Testament? Doesn't the life and work of Christ make a difference after all? The fact that He came and died gives specificity to His return.

Moltmann's proleptic eschatology focuses on the future to the detriment of the past and present. In fact, he proposes that Christ can do the unexpected, the startling new—cut off from His promises in the Bible. He takes this position in a supposed defense of God's sovereignty—God can do as He chooses. Yet any quest supporting God's future exercise of sovereignty will, if severed from His past demonstration of sovereignty, prove no defense at all. It destroys what it sets out to defend.

Scripture is balanced, recognizing all three dimensions. It roots the return of Christ in a past event of Christ. The end came when Jesus cried out, "It is finished" (John 19:30). That is why Scripture repeatedly speaks of the end as already come. For example, "Now once in the end of the world hath he [Christ] appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb. 9:26, KJV); "the ends of the world are come" (1 Cor. 10:11, KJV); hence, "God . . . hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son" (Heb. 1:2, KJV); and "we know that it is the last time" (1 John 2:18, KJV).

Two Pictures of the Second Advent

There are five major passages on

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the Second Advent in Revelation. We will consider two of them. In Revelation 14 He arrives on a white cloud as a "Son of man" with a crown on His head. The crown is a *stephanos* in the Greek, that is, a laurel wreath of victory worn by the winner of an Olympic game. Three angels accompany Christ. I call them the other three angels of Revelation 14. The first three angels have a message (Rev. 14:6-13). These three angels have a mission (verses 15-20). Christ and an angel have a sickle. They come to implement the double verdict (deliverance/destruction) of the pre-Advent judgment. The first angel calls for Christ to "take the sickle and reap" (verse 15). Christ reaps the harvest of the righteous (verse 16). Then Revelation introduces the second angel, the one who has a sharp sickle (verse 17). The third angel calls "in a loud voice to him who has the sharp sickle, 'Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth's vine'" (verse 18). To whom does the third angel speak—Christ or the second angel? For both have a sickle. Here is the answer. "The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath" (verse 19).

The vision pictures Christ as delivering His people and the angel as destroying the wicked. It is significant that Revelation does not present Christ as eradicating the wicked in this scene. Rather, He comes as the Son of man, as a fellow human, with a laurel wreath reminiscent of His human victory for His bride.

In stark contrast, Revelation 19:11

shows Christ arriving on a white horse, leading an army to make war. He wears many diadem crowns on His head, crowns worn only by those of royal heritage. Here Christ returns as King of kings (verse 16), and as such He comes to destroy the enemies of His bride. Thus Revelation presents the Second Advent from two different perspectives. In one, Christ returns as a fellow human being who has been through the greatest time of trouble, worse than any other ever endured by humans. He understands His people in their future great time of trouble and returns to take them home. Christ also arrives as God to defeat the world conglomerate moving to annihilate His bride in the greatest rescue mission of all time, an experience that the redeemed will never forget. Christ delivers His people and destroys their enemies, and He actively implements the double verdict of the pre-Advent judgment in His second advent. We are now ready to study the background to this event and all that is involved: Armageddon.

Armageddon

1. More Than a Middle East Confrontation

Many Christians believe in the battle of Armageddon but hold numerous interpretations. Most look for a Middle East conflict in Palestine's Megiddo region. Multitudes nervously watch Israeli-Arab relations as the trigger to ignite world destruction. After all, the oil stakes are high. But the Bible gives a totally different picture. Scripture speaks of Armageddon as the ultimate climax—not between nations squabbling over oil, but between the two sides of the cosmic

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controversy. It's a religious struggle, not economic or political.

Before the demise of Russian Communism, historian Arnold J. Toynbee exposed the root crisis of today when he affirmed, "The fundamental conflict is not political but religious; and the dividing line between the two religious camps is not the present world-encompassing political boundary between Russian and an American sphere of political influence. The line cuts across the inward spiritual world within every living soul today—whatever label of political citizenship may have been stamped on its body by the accident of birth."⁸ Seventh-day Adventists believe the world is fast polarizing into two groups—those against God and those for Him.

The global nature of the battle is clear from two passages. Revelation 14:14-20 mentions the word "earth" four times. Revelation 16:12-16 tells how spirits of devils go to "the kings of the whole world" to gather people to their side in the battle. Three counter-feit messages call humanity to join Satan's side. The three angels' messages go to the whole world (Rev. 14:6-12) to summon people to join Christ's side in the battle. Here we have two global missions. Three spirits of devils and the three angelic messengers gather the world for the same battle in the end-time.

2. Presentation of the Battle in Revelation

When John has something important to say, he repeats the point, and the repetition expands his thinking. That is true in his presentation of Armageddon.

The first mention of the end-time battle occurs in one verse (Rev. 12:17). Satan is angry against the church and goes to wage war against her. This passage focuses on his anger at the end-time church. He is out to destroy end-time saints. Chapter 13 describes his battle against it. Chapters 15-19 continue to add details.

3. The Roots of Armageddon

The well-used Armageddon passage (Rev. 16:12-16) didn't arise in a vacuum. Its roots go back through at least seventeen biblical books clear to Genesis. After all, the book of Revelation comprises a veritable mosaic of Old Testament allusions and references—some 600 of them. Without a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament we will lose much of the meaning of the book, including that of Armageddon.

The Reformers' principle of the Bible interpreting the Bible (*sola scriptura*) is the key to unlock Revelation. We should go to the Bible and not to passing political history, for the interpretation of Armageddon. To look beyond Scripture is to step outside of the canon.

As we approach the Bible we ask it to reveal its own inner rationality rather than superimposing on it any alien presupposition of the researcher. The Bible is a book that operates according to definite laws of interpretation, just as nature does. To discover and apply them will unlock the mystery of Armageddon and help us understand what is happening to the nations today.

A root passage for Armageddon is Joel 3. There God warns, "I will gather

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all nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. . . . For there I will sit to judge all the nations on every side. Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow—so great is their wickedness" (Joel 3:2-13). The passage finds its fulfillment in Revelation 14:19, in which "the angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath" (Rev. 14:19). That's part of Armageddon. The past tense emphasizes its certainty. The event happens at the Second Advent.

4. Types of Armageddon in the Old Testament

One principle that emerges from Bible study is that a local happening often typifies something worldwide in scope. For example, Jerusalem's destruction is a type of the coming world destruction (Matt. 24). The same is true of Armageddon. We'll consider a few examples. The local root reference to Megiddo appears in Judges 4 and 5. Israel languished during 20 years of oppression (Judges 4:3). God promised deliverance (verses 6-9), and every enemy soldier perished (verse 16). The Lord avenged Israel (Judges 5:2) at the battle of Megiddo (verse 19), and the land had rest for 40 years (verse 31).

Here we find that Israel—as God's people and not as a political entity—is the focus of attack and of deliverance. Many years later history repeated itself. God's people faced another local battle as a type of Armageddon (not in Megiddo). A number of nations surrounded Israel (2 Chron. 20:1, 2).

Judah, under Jehoshaphat, sought God in utter helplessness (verses 3, 12). And the Lord said, "'Fear not, and be not dismayed at this great multitude; for the battle is not yours but God's'" (verse 15, RSV). "'Fear not, and be not dismayed; tomorrow go out against them, and the Lord will be with you'" (verse 17, RSV). The next day strong soldiers sang a doxology—they didn't fight—and God won the battle. Not one of the enemy escaped (verses 21-24).

The river of Kishon (Judges 4:7, 19-21) is a synonym for Megiddo, or Armageddon. The third local Armageddon battle takes place on Mount Carmel between the priests of Baal and Elijah (1 Kings 18:40). Elijah is a type of the end-time church (Mal. 4:5). Just as false worship surrounded Elijah, the world will encompass God's people in Armageddon. Though outnumbered, Elijah triumphed. All the prophets of Baal perished at the river of Kishon, or Megiddo.

In all three local Armageddon examples we find (1) God's people totally outnumbered, (2) the enemy totally destroyed, and (3) God's people totally delivered. Interestingly, each episode involved a prophet: Deborah (Judges 4:4), Jahazeel (2 Chron. 20:14), and Elijah. But far more important, God brought the destruction/deliverance. So it will be in the end-time. God's people will be totally outnumbered—the whole world against a remnant. You can't get any more outnumbered than that! But God will stand up and fight for His people, annihilating the wicked and delivering the saints. And throughout the end-time the prophetic voice will be in the midst of the saints (Joel 2:28, 29).

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Leaving these three types of Armageddon, we come to consider one more. Time passed, and so did Israel—into captivity to Babylon. But God was ready for the emergency. More than a century before He had prophesied that Cyrus would be His instrument to deliver Israel from Babylon (Isa. 45:47). Babylon would be overthrown in “a single day” (Isa. 47:9), the same language used of spiritual Babylon in Armageddon’s battle (Rev. 18:8). Just as literal Israel triumphed over literal Babylon, so will spiritual Israel (the church) be victorious over spiritual Babylon (the enemy of the church). And the arrival of Cyrus to save Israel from Babylon symbolizes Christ’s advent to rescue spiritual Israel.

5. Armageddon and the Cosmic Controversy

“How do you know Armageddon has to do with the cosmic controversy? Sure, you have proved it is worldwide, but so what? Couldn’t that be true of a secular war?”

Excellent questions. First, the Bible is not a book about secular history. It’s about God’s people, and nations get into the Bible only if they have something to do with God’s people, whether they fight against them or support them. That’s why America appears in the Bible. It will play a major role against God’s people in the end-time. On the other hand, China, with a fifth of the world’s population, has not even one mention in Scripture.

Furthermore, contextual evidence indicates that Armageddon consists of a spiritual, not a secular, battle. In the middle of the Armageddon passage,

Christ says, “Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed” (Rev. 16:15). It’s the same message given to the Laodicean church (Rev. 3:18), a repetition of God’s appeal to His last church to wear Christ’s robe of righteousness. Only those whom Christ delivers from sin can He rescue in Armageddon (Dan. 12:1).

6. The Battle

When is the battle? The final gathering takes place during the sixth plague (Rev. 16:12). That will be toward the end of Jacob’s trouble, a fact that should give pause to those in the past who have seen Armageddon written large on any passing event such as the Gulf War. In order to be Armageddon two international events must take place first: that is, the Sunday law (Rev. 13:3, 4, 12-14), and the death decree (verse 15).

a. Step One: Implementation of Death Decree Attempted

Armageddon rages during the seventh plague. It consists of three major steps. The death decree constitutes the opening volley of the war. “With shouts of triumph, jeering, and imprecation, throngs of evil men are about to rush upon their prey, when, lo, a dense blackness, deeper than the darkness of the night, falls upon the earth. Then a rainbow, shining with the glory from the throne of God, spans the heavens and seems to encircle each praying company. The angry multitudes are suddenly arrested. Their mocking cries

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die away. The objects of their murderous rage are forgotten.”

“But none can pass the mighty guardians stationed about every faithful soul. Some are assailed in their flight from the cities and villages; but the swords raised against them break and fall powerless as a straw. Others are defended by angels in the form of men of war.”¹⁰

“The eye of God, looking down the ages, was fixed upon the crisis which His people are to meet, when earthly powers shall be arrayed against them. Like the captive exile, they will be in fear of death by starvation or by violence. But the Holy One who divided the Red Sea before Israel, will manifest His mighty power and turn their captivity.”¹¹ The preincarnate Christ promised His people during their captivity to Egypt, “I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them and will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment” (Ex. 6:6).

b. Step Two: Enemy Killing Themselves

In so many Armageddonlike battles in history, the enemy forces have killed each other (Judges 7:19-23; 1 Sam. 14:19, 20; 2 Chron. 20:22-24; Isa. 19:2; Eze. 38:14-23; and Haggai 2:22). It happens again in Armageddon. When God manifests Himself as with His people, then those who have followed religious leaders and been deceived now turn on their leaders and put them to death.

“After the saints had been delivered

by the voice of God, the wicked multitude turned their rage against one another. The earth seemed to be deluged with blood, and dead bodies were from one end to the other.”¹² “The people see that they have been deluded. They accuse one another of having led them to destruction; but all unite in heaping their bitterest condemnation upon the ministers. . . . The swords which were to slay God’s people are now employed to destroy their enemies. Everywhere there is strife and bloodshed.”¹³

We have already studied that the ten kings who unite with the harlot for one hour in the end-time (Rev. 17:12), when all the world wonders and worships the church (Rev. 13:3, 4), will also turn on her. “They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire” (Rev. 17:16). Evidently it is not a total annihilation, because Christ will throw the beast into the lake of fire (Rev. 19:19, 20) in the Second Advent (Rev. 19:14-19). For our purpose here, we note that this revenge against the harlot church by the conglomerate of nations may also be a part of the battle of Armageddon.

c. Step Three: Angel of Death

Just as “the destroying angel” did his work in the Passover release of Israel from Egypt,¹⁴ so the destroying angel will do his assignment before the release of God’s people in the Second Coming (Rev. 14:19, 20). He “goes forth, represented in Ezekiel’s vision by the men with the slaughtering weapons, to whom the command is given: ‘Slay utterly old and young, both maids, and little children, and women.’”¹⁵

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d. Step Four: Hail

Now is the time for the seventh plague. Christ has said, "It is done!" (Rev. 16:17). Just as God sent "the worst hailstorm ever" to fall on Egypt (Ex. 9:18), so He afflicts on the planet the worst earthquake ever "since man has been on the earth" (Rev. 16:18), with "huge hailstones of about a hundred pounds each," described as "so terrible" (verse 21). In Armageddon God's people do not fight. They stand still as God manifests His presence to protect them, as He causes the enemy to kill each other, as the angel of death does his work on their behalf, and as hail falls from the heavens to destroy the enemy. Throughout the battle God leads the fight. The saints simply rest in Christ and see Him work out their deliverance.

Often in such Armageddonlike battles God rained down hail on those He punishes (Joshua 10:7-14; Job 38:22, 23; Isa. 30:29, 30). Hail is one of His weapons of choice. The seventh plague will decimate the enemy.

e. Step Five: Second Advent

The fullest amplification of Armageddon comes in the Second Advent portrayal in Revelation 19:14-21. Christ rides a white horse, leading an army on white horses. "I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. . . . And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. . . . And He

has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: King of kings and Lord of lords. . . . And I saw the beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against Him who sat on the horse and against His army" (verses 14-19, NKJV).

We should note that people still remain alive after the other steps of Armageddon (Rev. 6:12-17). The armies are gathered to make war. In that war "the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image [see Rev. 16:13, 14]. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse" (Rev. 19:20, 21).

Scripture has still another way to describe this final phase of the battle. The sixth plague speaks about the water of the Euphrates being "dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the East" (Rev. 16:12). The diversion of the water of the Euphrates caused the fall of ancient Babylon, allowing access to the city. Cyrus gained a glorious victory and later liberated Israel from its 70 years of captivity.

Spiritual Babylon will have spiritual Israel in captivity. The kings of the East will dry up the river. Or put another way, waters (river) represent people (Rev. 17:15). With the annihilation of the enemies of God's people (i.e., drying up of the river), they will be delivered. But who are the kings of the East? Some interpreters once considered Japan and China the kings of the East

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during World War II. Others have suggested Israel and Palestine as candidates in more recent times. But Armageddon is the final battle in the great controversy this side of the millennium and thus not just a secular battle.

Bible writers regarded east as the direction from heaven. Thus the sealing angel from heaven comes from the east (Rev. 7:2). In Revelation 4 and 5 we have a vision of the throne room. There the Father sits on the throne (Rev. 5:1-5), and the Son comes to Him (verses 6, 7). They hold center stage throughout the chapter. At the end of the chapter we find another presentation of Armageddon: an earthquake and signs in the heavens, with islands and mountains removed from their place (Rev. 6:12-14), the same description about islands and mountains given in the seventh plague (Rev. 16:20). "Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne [the Father] and from the wrath of the Lamb [Christ]! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'" (Rev. 6:15-17). Here we see fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah when human beings will throw away their money they have idolized and run for the rocks to hide (Isa. 2:10-12, 20, 21; 13:6).

So the Kings of the East, the Father and Son, come vaulting through the heavens on the greatest rescue mission ever attempted in history. They complete the destruction of the wicked and

deliver God's people. It is the glorious pre-Advent climax called the battle of Armageddon. Jesus predicted this moment. He said, "I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:64). He also speaks of "when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels" (Luke 9:26).

"Then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming" (2 Thess. 2:8). Ellen White describes the event another way: "At the coming of Christ the wicked are blotted from the face of the whole earth—consumed with the spirit of His mouth and destroyed by the brightness of His glory."¹⁶

The annihilation of all the enemies of God's people repeats the total destruction of such enemies in previous Armageddon battles (Judges 4:16; 1 Kings 18:40; 2 Chron. 20:23, 24). The world's population is decimated. All the enemies of the saints are dead, and God delivers His people and whisks them off to heaven. That's the finale of their journey through last-day events, the end of their exodus through the ultimate Red Sea.

The Book of Esther

The book of Esther is important for understanding final events. In it we see a death decree issued to kill God's people (Esther 3:13). The authorities give the date of execution, just as it will be in the end-time.¹⁷ But God intervenes, just as He will in the battle of Armageddon.

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Haman represents those who hate the saints. Mordecai symbolizes God's saints. Although Haman builds a 75-foot gallows on which to hang Mordecai (Esther 5:14), he ends up executed upon it himself (Esther 7:9, 10). So it will be in the coming death decree. With instruments raised to kill the saints, God will manifest His presence around His people. The murderers halt in their track, and kill those leaders who led them astray, as mentioned above.

The stories of Armageddon show

that Christ will be with His people in their hour of greatest need. When all the world is against them, He will be for them. He wants us to know that He will have the last word, because He already had the last word at Calvary. Armageddon is the working out in history of what He accomplished at the cross. For there Christ delivered His people and decided the destiny of the devil. Satan is doomed to destruction, and God's people destined for deliverance—all because of Calvary. ☺

¹ Jack Cranfield and Mark Victor Hansen, *Chicken Soup for the Soul* (Deerfield, Fla: Health Communications, Inc., 1993), pp. 61-63

² E. G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 458

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 363, 364

⁴ Aad Verbeek, Jan Westein, and Piet Westein, *Time for His Coming*. Sara Van Akker and Ria Westein, trans., from *Tijd voor der Wederkomst* (Aad Verbeek, Netherlands, 1995), p. 7

⁵ E. G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 457

⁶ David J. Bosch, *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980), p. 235

⁷ Norman R. Gulley, "1980: The Dawn of a New Era," *These Times*, January 1980, pp. 3-6

⁸ Cited by Francis D. Nichol in *Our Firm Foundation* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1953), vol. 1, p. 612

⁹ E. G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 635, 636

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 631

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 634

¹² E. G. White, *Early Writings*, p. 290

¹³ E. G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 655, 656

¹⁴ E. G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 279

¹⁵ E. G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 656

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 657

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 635

Chapter 45

The Other Journey

In their darkest hour—when hope seems gone, when instruments of death stare them in the face—deliverance comes.

"Look up," says a melodious voice, "look up."

Black, angry clouds part, and they "see the glory of God and the Son of man seated upon His throne. In His divine form they discern the marks of His humiliation; and from His lips they hear the request presented before His Father and the holy angels: 'I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am' (John 17:24). Again a voice, musical and triumphant, is heard, saying: 'They come! they come! holy, harmless, and undefiled. They have kept the word of My patience; they shall walk among the angels'; and the pale, quivering lips of those who have held fast their faith utter a shout of victory."¹

These words from Ellen White's book *The Great Controversy* appear in the chapter "God's People Delivered." Then Ellen White quotes Revelation 16:17 in which God says, "It is done."

This occurs at the seventh plague. So right at the beginning of the battle of Armageddon, when God delivers His people from the death decree's implementation, the saints shout victory. Who wouldn't if they saw the Father and the Son in heaven on Their throne? Here is the only focus to have in the end-time, and God gives it to the saints when they need it the most.

The Great Divide

Look at the contrast. "The mountains shake like a reed in the wind, and ragged rocks are scattered on every side. There is a roar as of a coming tempest. The sea is lashed into fury. There is heard the shriek of a hurricane like the voice of demons upon a mission of destruction. The whole earth heaves and swells like the waves of the sea. Its surface is breaking up. Its very foundations seem to be giving way. Mountain chains are sinking. Inhabited islands disappear. The seaports that have become like Sodom for wickedness are swallowed up by the angry waters. . . . Great hailstones, every one 'about the weight of a